

Female Portrayals in Mass Media: An Analysis  
of Women in Animated Disney Films

By

MELISSA ELLEN SEYLER

Bachelor of Arts

Shippensburg University

Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

1996

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS  
May, 1999

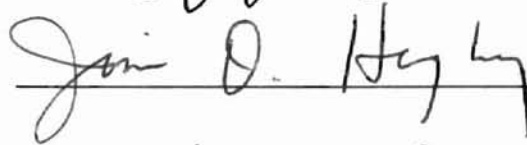
Female Portrayals in Mass Media: An Analysis  
of Women in Animated Disney Films

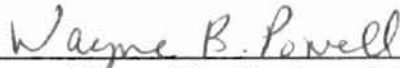
Thesis Approved:



Thesis Advisor







Dean of the Graduate College

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. David Schrader earned my sincere recognition concerning the direction that this thesis has taken. He helped me shape this thesis and still allowed me to focus specifically on gender. I would also like to thank Dr. Jim Hughey and Dr. Mary Mandeville for their contributions as members of my thesis committee.

I would like to thank all of the professors in the Speech Communication department at Shippensburg University for their excellent ability to teach and to encourage learning. I would especially like to thank Dr. Eveline Lang for her teachings in the area of gender. Her lectures on communication and gender allowed me to develop this thesis.

I would most like to thank my parents, Margaret Keller and Marlin Seyler for supporting me throughout my education. It is through their willingness to understand me that I feel that I can accomplish anything. Thanks mom and dad.

Lastly, I would like to thank my dear friend, Jamey Reichow. It is through his friendship that I have enjoyed researching and writing this thesis. He once gave me a book on gender and communication as a gift. Receiving that book really showed me how much he cared about me and my scholarly ability. Thank you for all of your love and support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION_____	1
	Statement of Purpose_____	2
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW_____	3
	Women in the Mass Media_____	3
	Women as Sexual Objects_____	3
	The Perfectly Shaped Woman_____	5
	Women's Responses to Mass Media Portrayals_____	7
	Fairy Tales as a Persuasive Channel to an Audience_____	9
	Development of Gender Roles_____	9
	Cultural Forces that Influence Body Images_____	10
	Feminist Perspectives on Fairy Tales_____	12
	Feminist Criticism as a Type of Rhetorical Analysis_____	14
	Definitions and Steps Used in Feminist Criticism_____	14
	Examples of Feminist Criticism_____	16
III.	METHODOLOGY_____	18
IV.	ANALYSIS_____	20
	Analysis of the Conception of Gender Presented in Disney Films__	20
	Effects of the Artifacts' Conception on Gender on the Audience__	23
	The Artifacts and How it Affects Women's Lives_____	26
	The Artifacts' Impact On Rhetorical Theory_____	27
V.	CONCLUSION_____	30
	REFERENCES_____	32

## Chapter I

### Introduction

Thievon (1992) suggests that, “critics claim that women have historically been portrayed in the majority of advertisements filling the mass media as playing the roles of either sex-objects or housewives” (p.1). The mass media is one of the main channels in society in which men and women transmit and receive information about their gender roles. It is through society that men and women may gather gender constructs. Men and women transmit messages through society about their respective gender types. They also receive messages through society about who they should be. Society rules how they view themselves in terms of gender, behavior and, most importantly, appearance. Women in general receive a lot of input from the mass media about their looks and behaviors. One of the mediums that young girls receive information from is through the mass media. More specifically they receive information from Disney fairy tales.

Little girls everywhere love the stories of Disney. They associate themselves with Disney characters in their youth, and carry those wants and desires into adulthood. It is through Disney that children learn that each female character is an icon to strive to be like. This is still apparent even in the feminist revolution of the nineties. So what is wrong with the youth wanting to be beautiful, innocent, and kind? The problem lies in the other traits attributed to female characters. Disney women may be beautiful, but they also appear to be feeble-minded, lacking ambition (other than to marry a wealthy man) and, most importantly, helpless. This message communicates to young girls that they need a man to succeed in life. Shocking as it may be, the need for a man is inherent in all women that loved Disney as a child. There is a flip side to a lot of female Disney

characters. The “evil” stepmother in Cinderella is ugly, vicious, and untrustworthy. These characteristics make little girls afraid and fill their minds with the idea that this is the type of person they should never associate with themselves. When looked at more closely, the “evil” stepmother also appears cunning, intelligent, witty, and independent. I believe I just described the perfect nineties' woman.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the portrayals of women in classic animated Disney films as a channel of the mass media. This study is important because of the immense unawareness of how society affects women. This critical study is also important to the field of communication theory because it will look at how women receive and process information from the mass media. My intention is to then perform a rhetorical analysis on Disney’s animated films, paying special attention to any detrimental undertones that female youth carry with them into adulthood. It is through this analysis that I hope to shed light on some classics that people have watched for decades, and how it has affected women throughout their lives. I will also look at a more contemporary animated Disney film. It is my standpoint that these films encourage young women to grow up to be pretty, married, and yes, dumb.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

In order to do a thorough analysis of women portrayals in animated Disney films, I must first review other works that will assist me in performing my rhetorical analysis. I will first review literature on women in the mass media. This will include women as sexual objects, the mass media's portrayal of the perfectly shaped woman and how women receive and process these portrayals. Second, I will look at fairy tales as a persuasive channel to an audience. This will include the development of gender roles, how cultural forces influence body images, and feminist perspectives on fairy tales. Third, I will review feminist criticism as a type of rhetorical analysis. This will include the steps involved and some examples of exemplary work utilizing feminist criticism. In the course of this review, I will uncover what conclusions have been drawn about women portrayals in the mass media and in fairy tales. It will then be my purpose to add to this research a rhetorical analysis of animated Disney films.

#### **Women in the Mass Media**

##### **Women as Sexual Objects**

Zoonen (1994) claims that, "a core element of western patriarchal culture is the display of woman as spectacle to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience" (p. 87). Zoonen writes about spectatorship and the gaze in her book, *Feminist Media Studies*. The idea that women are spectacles and gazed at by men is obviously nothing new. Most women are unaware that they are in a reserved position to look at men, but the opposite is true for men to look at women (Zoonen, 1994).

Women are seen as sexual objects in not only pornography, but in the advertisements of drinks, tools and cars. Women are constantly seen draped over cars and wearing a bikini with a beer in hand. It is these types of advertisements that put women in the spotlight because they are usually the most popular commercials, and they are usually shown during prime time. Men will be more inclined to buy a product if the woman in the advertisement is sexy, thin, and preferably blonde (Zoonen, 1994).

Women look at *Sports Illustrated* magazines and watch men look at the magazines and feel inadequate because they don't measure up to the perfect model. Although women tend to fall under a male gaze, it is interesting to look at how women view themselves as sexual objects. Walsh-Childers (1996) writes,

The cover of *Sports Illustrated*'s twentieth anniversary swimsuit issue, for instance, shows a deeply tanned Kathy Ireland wearing a canary yellow strapless bikini. She's seated near a tropical-looking pool, knees about shoulder-width apart, and her arms are crossed so that she's holding the top of each shin with her opposite-side hand. The effect is to create the maximum possible cleavage below the model's 'come hither' smile (p.82).

It is through this description that we may start to see that there is an immense emphasis placed on breasts, hips, and tan skin. Women feel that, in order to be sexy, they must have an hourglass shape and a bronze skin tone. For instance, even though tanning is very harmful to the skin women still go to tanning beds to get that deep dark glow. Women feel the need to be tan because they see the male gaze on bombshells in bikinis on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* (Walsh-Childers, 1996).

Along the same lines, Allan and Coltrane (1996) compare television commercials of the 1950's and 1980's. The study showed that there has been a change in the images



of women, but not men. Women in commercials in the 1980's are much more likely to be pictured in job-related activity and in more diverse occupations than in the 1950's. Allan and Coltrane (1996) also claim that, "as sex objects and potential mates, women tend to be pictured as preoccupied with their physical beauty and attractiveness" (p. 187). This also held true. It is through these types of sex object portrayals that women again fall under the male gaze. Allan and Coltrane do elaborate that there is only a slight difference between the men of the 1950's and 1980's as far as their portrayals on commercials are concerned. Women, however, are still portrayed as sexual objects throughout time.

Allan and Coltrane (1996) also stress the impact that mass media portrayals have on children as they learn their gender roles. Boys and girls will watch television and begin to learn what the stereotypical relationships and jobs are for men and women. They will then develop a sense of which they should attempt to become. It is through the associations that girls and boys make that they develop their social and physical roles. The physical roles that girls discover as they grow up lead to high expectations. The 'perfect body' ideal is the next topic of discussion.

### **The Perfectly Shaped Woman**

Little girls learn about what their body should look like through their family and also through the mass media. Cash, Ancis, and Strachan (1997) claim that, "cultural forces influence body-image development in gender-contingent ways, such that women in our society possess more dysfunctional body-image attitudes than do men" (p. 433). Cash, et al., studied college women to see if there was a relationship between gender

attitudes and body-image attitudes. Their findings confirmed that women with conventional expectations and preferences about gender roles in male-female social relations were more invested in their looks and, to a greater extent, had internalized societal standards for and maladaptive assumptions about their physical appearance (Cash et al., 1997).

Coward (1992) also examined women's bodies as they are portrayed through mass media. She claims,

Somehow along the line, most women know that the image is impossible, and corresponds to the wishes of our culture rather than being actually attainable. We remain trapped by the image, though, because our culture generates such a violent dislike of fat, fragmenting our bodies into separate areas, each of them way too big (p. 418).

Coward is attempting to explain that women do indeed receive the message that a perfect body is a good thing to aspire to have, but it is not necessarily possible to attain. She also elaborates on the fact that there are so few models that actually make it to the billboards, and women don't realize that not everyone can attain perfect bodies. As a society, we have an ideal that women should be built the way so few models are. According to Coward (1992) this is not true when you consider the ratio of female models to the general population of women in the United States.

Coward also explains that many of the models we see on television are touched up after photographs are taken, a factor not always considered when advertisements with beautiful, perfectly shaped women are viewed. She also considers the factor that being shaped well allows women to fall under the male gaze, whereas a heavysset woman does not. Coward (1992) explains, "it is not a shape (that which) suggests power or force. It

has already been fairly widely documented how women often choose to remain 'fat' because of the power which somehow accrues to them" (p. 414). Coward discusses the idea of powerlessness among perfectly shaped women. She claims that heavy-set women have a power that thin women do not possess. A heavy-set woman will be looked at as a person before she is looked at as a woman. This is power in the sense that a thin woman will have difficulty getting information across to males because they see her as a woman before a person. Overall, Coward provides a lot of insight on the perfectly shaped beautiful woman that are seen on billboards, in magazines, and on television.

### **Women's Responses to Mass Media Portrayals**

Peirce (1995) writes that, "while the children are learning gender roles from their families and at school, they are also seeing them reinforced in the media" (p. 81). Many young girls have doubts about who they are and who they should strive to be. Some of them will develop eating disorders, and some of them will fall into bouts of depression. Mass media reinforces what our family and friends teach us about our gender roles (Peirce, 1995).

More often than not the media describes women as having menial concerns about romance, fashion, beauty, and pop stars. Coincidentally, the mass media seldomly addresses issues that would depict women as individuals. An analysis was performed by Peirce (1995) on *Seventeen* and *Teen* magazines to see if it followed traditional ideology. Traditional ideology includes the importance of looking good, finding a man, and taking care of a home. The results were that appearance was the dominant category for both of

the magazines. In *Seventeen* magazine pages devoted to appearance have actually increased by ten percent since 1985 (Peirce, 1995).

These magazines teach teenage girls about gender roles. Pierce (1995) claims that “teens are still learning how to live in the world, so it wouldn’t be going too far to suggest that the ingredients for message receptiveness are there: inadequate social realities and media dependency” (p. 84). Mass media does indeed reflect in some ways what women believe they should be like.

Women integrate what they see and hear into their own selves. Jean Kilbourne (1995) agrees that “many women internalize these stereotypes and learn their ‘limitations,’ thus establishing a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 125). A woman begins to see her face as a type of mask and her body as an object. It is interesting to note that more than one million dollars is spent every hour on cosmetics (Kilbourne, 1995). Women are made to feel dissatisfied and ashamed of themselves because they cannot achieve ‘the look.’ All of this leads to dieting, depression, and possibly eating disorders.

In 1995, one in five college-age women had an eating disorder (Kilbourne, 1995). This statistic may be surprising to some, but not to the women who have had experiences with the desire to be thin. The statistics are even starting to applying to young girls. According to Kilbourne, a study conducted at the University of California showed that eighty percent of fourth-grade girls in the Bay Area are watching their weight. It is through these alarming statistics that we may begin to see that woman are internalizing stereotypes from the mass media about being sexy, thin, and beautiful (Kilbourne, 1995).

## **Fairy Tales as a Persuasive Channel to an Audience**

### **Development of Gender Roles**

When fairy tales are read or watched, society does not ascertain the tale as a persuasive channel. Lieberman (1986) asserts that “we know that children are socialized or culturally conditioned by movies, television programs, and the stories they read or hear, and we have begun to wonder at the influence that children’s stories and entertainment has upon us, though we cannot now measure the extent of that influence” (pp. 186-187). Lieberman illustrates how children are acculturated through the stories we watch and hear. The stereotypes we acquire by listening to these stories can haunt us for the rest of our lives. Women, in particular, seem to be haunted by characters they were taught to love as a child. Lieberman (1986) explains that, “Among other things, these tales present a picture of sexual roles, behavior, and psychology, and a way of predicting outcome or fate according to sex, which is important because of the intense interest that children take in ‘endings’; they always want to know how things will ‘turn out’” (p. 187). In essence, children learn about their gender roles in life according to not only the people around them, but also the certain persuasive channels through which they take in information.

Lieberman (1986) also discusses the characteristics that girls and women innately carry with them through the stereotypes in fairy tales. When children are young and “innocent,” they are very open to suggestion. As a result, they often look to their parents and other sources, such as television, to acquire knowledge on who they are and who they should become. In particular, Lieberman discusses self-concepts that girls begin to make about themselves through the characters in fairy tales. The ideas that pretty girls are

never ignored, and that being shy and passive is good, is prevalent throughout the article. Lieberman points out that physical attractiveness often leads to interpersonal rewards, including marriage. There is a focus on beauty as a girl's most valuable asset and often it stands as the only one. A young girl is very susceptible to setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy of being plain and then associates the plainness with unpleasantness. A young girl learns that Snow White is chosen because she is the, 'fairest of them all' and then in turn strives to be the 'fairest'. Furthermore, young girls set high ideals for themselves that are not realistically possible. Many years later it is still inherent in women to strive to be the prettiest and get 'chosen' by a man. Overall, Lieberman (1986) provides much needed insight on how not only young girls, but women, are acculturated to develop certain beautiful and passive characteristics to survive in life.

### **Cultural Forces That Influence Body Images**

More often than not, it is easy to turn on the television and see a woman in a commercial portraying a stereotypical role. Lafky, Duffy, Steinmaus, and Berkowitz (1996) did a study on female stereotyping in advertisements and on gender role expectations. Their findings indicate that (1) even short-term exposure to sex-stereotyped images will affect audience perceptions of gender roles, (2) exposure to gender stereotypes in advertising will cultivate among viewers more traditional attitudes toward gender roles, (3) there will be a statistically significant relationship between the gender of the subjects and the ways in which the subjects draw upon heuristics to cognitively process advertising images that include representation of gender roles (Lafky et al. 1996). It is through this study that a conclusion may be drawn that what men and women see and

hear through advertisements affects how they develop in their gender roles. It is one of the most important sources of information men and women receive about themselves and who they should strive to be. It should then be no surprise that women see models with perfect bodies and aspire to be just like them. They are very susceptible to the mass media, because it surrounds them at all times. The mass media dictates to them what is right and wrong, and they believe it.

Often women are portrayed in advertisements that are reminiscent of medieval times. MacCurdy (1994) discusses historical resonance in modern ads. She claims that there are four images that can still be seen today in advertisements. "The courtly lady, the Virgin Mary, the temptress, and the sex object are still with us. These four images are not representational but are fantasy images based on the unmet needs of contemporary women" (MacCurdy, 1994, p. 34).

Advertisements that depict the courtly lady include Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds perfume, Estee Lauder makeup, and Halston perfume. These advertisements depict a woman as being beautiful, perfectly shaped, and unattainable to lowly men. The Virgin Mary image is displayed in mother and child ads. The temptress image usually involves groups of women together in a manner, which dictates power. They are usually wearing some form of black leather. Calvin Klein advertisements illustrate this image. Finally, the sex object woman is depicted as a commodity to be bought, sold, traded, and shown off. Once again Calvin Klein depicts the woman at the will of man: "An infamous spread for jeans includes a Harley motorcycle on one page and a shirtless man dressed in jeans, grabbing a woman by her naked buttocks, on the other page" (MacCurdy, 1994, p. 41). These depictions demonstrate that women are portrayed in a

certain way, so that they are objectified. When women view these depiction's they often wonder what is right and wrong. Who is the proper woman to be, or rather who does *he* want me to be?

### **Feminist Perspectives on Fairy Tales**

Bernikow (1992) discusses Disney images of women and how they are transposed on young girls and women. She states, "I am stirred and confused by the contrast between bad and good women and the way it all seems to revolve around the issue of being pretty" (Bernikow, 1992, p. 265). She reinforces the idea that attractiveness is a female's most important attribute. Bernikow addresses the character of Cinderella specifically and what her characteristics are in the plot and as a person.

The idea of the glass slipper is one of ultimate daintiness as well as femininity. Bernikow (1992) remarks, "I wonder how Cinderella danced in it" (p. 267). This statement raises a very practical point. How did she dance in glass slippers? This is the point at which Bernikow introduces the idea of ancient Chinese foot binding and its correlation with the glass slipper. Ancient foot binding was a cultural tradition followed by women in ancient China. Women's feet were tightly wrapped to keep them small. Of course, Disney depicts Cinderella as having feet the size of a small infant; yet, she is fully-grown. Thus, the idea that small feet are dainty, feminine, and desirable no matter what the cost.

Bernikow (1992) also sheds new light on fairy tales in that she conjures a picture of ultimate suffering as a desirable objective. In order to be rewarded, a person must first be punished. This is very true of all fairy tales that depict heroines as pitiful and in



'distress'. Society watches our heroines and loves them for the pain they suffer both emotionally and physically, and assume that they will be rewarded for their endurance. Bernikow examines this point in great detail, and looks at the thought process we go through when they watch Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty and assume that there is nothing they can do about their demise.

Bernikow provides examples and insight on how society falls into the trap of assuming that our heroines can do nothing. Why do men and women believe that? Why do they want to believe that? They watch patiently and tell themselves that a little suffering isn't bad if it is rewarded in the end. Consequently, the reward in the end is marriage to a prince that, to the best of my knowledge, has no personality. The prince in Cinderella is rich and handsome. Disney shows its audience no more than just his physical appearance and assumed wealth. Thus, society may conclude that women should strive for rich, handsome men that will sweep them off their feet, if they're pretty enough.

Overall, Bernikow gives a discerning outlook on fairy tales and on the attributes projected on young girls and women. She is also one of the only researchers who actually analyzes gender roles in fairy tales. Her work provides a clear outlook on who a heroine is and what her goals in life are.

Brownmiller (1992) adds some important points about women's role as the victim in fairy tales. She claims that "women are trained to be rape victims" (p. 277). She proclaims that through fairy tales women are taught to be passive and allow themselves to be abused. Women are portrayed as helpless in fairy tales, and thus must be saved by a 'good friendly man.' There will always be a villain waiting to inflict some type of harm

upon out very fearful heroines. This is not to say that the villain is always male; they can be women as well. There is the notion that the villain has no sex; they are just evil. It is assumed that by nature women are helpless and passive (Brownmiller, 1992).

Brownmiller provides insight for my analysis about the idea of helplessness that is inherent in all fairy tales. Through Bernikow and Brownmiller, I have discovered characteristics that hold true throughout the stories of women in Disney. These are characteristics that young girls in our society learn and internalize.

### **Feminist Criticism as a Type of Rhetorical Analysis**

#### **Definitions and Steps Used in Feminist Criticism**

Feminist criticism as a type of rhetorical analysis utilizes the some of the same components that other types of analysis use. For instance, all analyses have an artifact in mind before the analysis can begin. Such artifacts include films, art works, books, articles, and architecture. When an artifact is clearly defined, the message it disperses to society is then carefully examined. As a subscriber to rhetoric and persuasion a person can define and analyze that which persuades them (Foss, 1989). Feminist criticism is “engaged in not only to re-examine rhetorical concepts and to develop new ones that incorporate women’s experiences but also to achieve a particular social purpose” (Foss, 1989, p. 154).

In order to do a thorough analysis, it is imperative that feminine and masculine perspectives be defined. Both feminine and masculine perspectives root from the definition of gender. Julia Wood (1996) defines gender as “meanings and expectations of men and women that are created and upheld by social processes and structures” (p. 5).

From that definition it can be inferred that men and women have different perspectives according to their gender.

There are four basic steps involved in using feminist criticism. The first step is the analysis of the conception of gender presented in the rhetorical artifact. In this step, the following questions are addressed: Does the artifact describe how the world looks and feels to women or men or both? How are femininity and masculinity depicted in the rhetorical artifact? Do the images conform to or violate society's representation of the ideal woman or man? What does the rhetorical artifact suggest are the behaviors, concerns, issues, values, qualities, and communication patterns of women and men apart from the society's definition of gender? (Foss, 1989).

The second step involves the discovery of the effects of the artifact's conception of gender on the audience. In this step, the critic is concerned with how the definition of gender associated with an artifact affects the audience for the artifact. The critic's objective in this step is to discover how the artifact is likely to affect a woman and a man and to influence their views of themselves and the opposite sex. This step can be interpreted in many different ways using specific instances from the rhetorical artifact (Foss, 1989).

The third step is a discussion of how the artifact may be used to improve women's lives. In this step the critic is concerned with how the analysis of the artifact can be used to alter the denigrating gender role assigned to women and to help them live in new ways. The rhetorical artifact may be a good model for women to follow or it may be detrimental to women and be illustrated as a poor model (Foss, 1989).

In this step, the critic is concerned with whether or not the artifact conforms to traditional views of rhetoric or suggests some new aspect about rhetoric. Some of the definitions used in rhetorical theory may be questioned. The fourth and final step in feminist criticism is an explanation of the artifact's impact on rhetorical theory. Also, feminist criticism may suggest that a revision of rhetorical tradition may be in order (Foss, 1989). It is through these steps that a thorough analysis may be performed on rhetorical artifacts utilizing feminist criticism.

### **Examples of Feminist Criticism**

Weinbaum (1998) performed one example of feminist criticism. Weinbaum reviews *Exchange* by Genevieve Vaughan, a book dedicated to the earth and also the ancient image of women's power. Weinbaum discusses how *Exchange* can be used to better women's lives in that it gives great insight on how women were treated in ancient times. Women were treated as unique and special because of their fertility. Weinbaum's interpretations are supported by specific instances that she points out throughout the article.

Foss (1989) also performed a rhetorical analysis on Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party: Empowering of women's voice in visual art*. In this analysis, Foss identifies some of the strategies that submerged groups use to empower their own perspective or to develop legitimacy for the knowledge and discourse that are available to them. Foss specifically examines the discourse of women through visual art as a form of rhetoric. The artifact was an art show that opened on March 14, 1979. Foss discusses three main strategies of the art: it is independent from male-created reality, it creates new standards

for evaluation of its own rhetoric, and women are clearly labeled as agents. The findings reflected that *The Dinner Party* did in fact follow each of these strategies. Lastly, Foss discusses how the art work does not follow in traditional views of rhetoric, but instead implicates a new generative theory (Foss, 1989).

Finally, Fetterly (1989) uses feminist criticism to examine the story of *Rip Van Winkle* by Washington Irving. Fetterly discusses the role of women throughout the story paying special attention to Rip's wife. She discusses how Rip's wife is what drives him away into the mountains because of her constant nagging. Fetterly also discusses how the women of the audience feel excluded from the story because they don't associate with Rip, and they don't want to associate with his wife. Finally she discusses how the story of *Rip Van Winkle* affects how women see themselves because of the nagging wife portrayal. Fetterly claims that, "It would be nice if the female reader, upon realizing the dimensions of her exclusion from the story, could dismiss *Rip Van Winkle* as having nothing to do with her" (Fetterly, in Foss, 1989, p. 182). She then goes on to discuss how women don't exclude themselves from the story because they associate themselves with Rip's wife according to sex.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

Feminist criticism is the best method suited for my artifacts because I am specifically looking at gender roles. Feminist criticism will allow me to clearly analyze the artifacts from a female perspective (Foss, 1989). This is important to my study because men and women have different experiences that effect the way they look at and interpret information.

The three specific classic animated Disney films that I will be analyzing are Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White. I have chosen these three films because they illustrate gender roles and are watched frequently by young girls and boys. The following is a brief synopsis of each film. Cinderella is the story of a beautiful, young girl who overcomes the cruelty of her stepmother and stepsisters and marries a prince. Sleeping Beauty is the story of a beautiful young princess who is cursed by a witch to fall into a deep sleep forever unless she receives a kiss from true love. Snow White is the story of a princess who is hated by her stepmother because of her beauty. Snow White's stepmother poisons her with an apple. She remains in a deep sleep forever unless she receives a kiss from true love. All three of the stories are similar in their plots, but each has its own unique twist. Disney released Cinderella in 1950, Sleeping Beauty in 1959, and Snow White in 1938. I will watch each of these films in their original format on videotape. Throughout the viewing of each film I will use each step of feminist criticism as my guide to analysis.

In using feminist criticism I will analyze these animated Disney films in four major steps. The first is the analysis of the conception of gender presented in Disney

films. I will address the following questions: Do classic Disney films show a man or a woman's point of view, or possibly both? Do the films affect men or women in a negative way? Finally, what does Disney suggest about men and women's behaviors in everyday life?

The next step will be the discovery of the effects of the artifacts' conception of gender on the audience. In this step, I will include how the men and women of the audience are made to feel about certain characters. I will examine the type of perspective the stories have, and how the audience adapts to them.

The third step will involve a discussion of how the artifacts may be used to improve women's lives. In this step, I will discuss how women characters in classic Disney films affect women's lives in their gender role development stages. I will also look at how a woman may better understand all of the characters and begin to associate with more than just one character.

The fourth step is to give an explanation of the artifacts' impact on rhetorical theory. In this step, I will be concerned with whether animated classic Disney films go along with traditional or new aspects of rhetoric. This step will entail looking at traditional views and definitions of rhetoric and whether the artifacts aid and follow them or not. I will be concentrating particularly on the intended meaning and persuasion that the artifacts project (Foss, 1989). Finally, I will look at how Disney films have changed traditional views in the nineties.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Analysis**

#### **Analysis of the Conception of Gender Presented in Disney Films**

The title and storyline of classic Disney films indicate that the story is about a heroine, thus making it predominately a female perspective. This is true for the most part, but not entirely valid. Some classic Disney films also illustrate a male perspective as well. First I will discuss the female perspective.

The female perspective occupies most of classic Disney films. In looking at the female perspective of Sleeping Beauty, for example, it is important to examine exactly how the movie focuses on her personality and her story. The movie begins with Sleeping Beauty as a baby who is cherished by all. The audience learns about how Sleeping Beauty is given special gifts by “fairies” to make her more attractive. This section of the film sets Sleeping Beauty up as the main character. Along the same lines, Cinderella is found at singing and dancing with birds and mice when she wakes up at the beginning of the film. This first scene alerts the audience that she is the main character and the audience recognizes that the story will be told most likely from her viewpoint. The viewpoints of both Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella are unique in that they don’t actually tell the story, but they are looked upon as the main characters due to the fact that they are the most prevalent people throughout both movies.

Female characters in classic Disney films affect women in many ways. Girls watching their favorite heroine feel sorry for her, but also see that she is a kind person. The negative aspect about this is that each heroine is considered unintelligent and unable to take care of herself. For example, Snow White becomes lost in a forest and looks for



shelter in a cabin. She finds out that there are seven male dwarfs living in the cabin. Luckily, they agree to protect and take care of her. The dwarfs are drawn to her beauty and singing ability. Helplessness can also be found in Cinderella. Mice, birds, a horse, and a dog take care of Cinderella. They are also attracted to her beauty, kindness, and beautiful singing.

Another aspect that is portrayed through these films is the reflection of a reward for ultimate suffering. For example, Cinderella's only 'dream' in life is to marry someone rich and handsome who will sweep her off her feet. Cinderella is made to suffer by being treated terribly by her stepmother and stepsisters before she can be ultimately happy. Little girls are made to feel that ultimate suffering will be rewarded and being pretty will also make a future mate find her desirable. Other examples can be found in Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. Both sing songs that call for a true love to come and sweep them off of their feet. In Sleeping Beauty, Princess Aurora is picking berries and begins to sing a song about a prince she dreamt about once upon a dream. The prince then approaches her and begins singing with her. After this happens Sleeping Beauty is made to suffer before she can see her prince again. Her ultimate suffering will result in the reward of a kiss from her prince. Snow White is also made to suffer by biting into a poison apple and falling into a deep sleep. The only thing that may awake her is the kiss from true love.

The ball in Cinderella is a perfect example of how poorly a classic Disney heroine illustrates courtship. The prince 'falls in love' with Cinderella because of her beauty and melodic voice. He never gets her name, but intends on marrying the woman who wore a child's size shoe. There is no conversation between the two except for a song they sing

when they first meet, 'So this is love.' This teaches girls that, in order to obtain love, a woman must be beautiful and dainty. It is important to note here that being attractive does have merit as far as attracting a mate, but it is not the only means by which a man finds a woman attractive. It is possible that being attractive and ultimate suffering will affect women in everyday life because they make assumptions based on their early childhood memories of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White.

The Disney version of Cinderella also condones a small section that is a male perspective. For example, in Sleeping Beauty, Prince Philip's perspective is not presented. His father's projection of his son's perspective along with his own is presented. It isn't really possible to see through the prince's eyes, due to the fact that there is no dialog for a basis of our understanding of him. The same holds true for Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. The prince in this film has a few lines, but never shows too much of his personality. Of course, the viewer does see that he is charming and caring, but they do not get to know him like Snow White. Therefore, we must look to others in the films that can speak for them. In Cinderella, the prince's father, the king, voices his son's opinions. The king finds out from a close trustee of the castle that the prince is bored with all the women he is 'supposed' to propose marriage. He can't seem to pick anyone. The king then decides to have a ball and to invite everyone in the kingdom. Low and behold, a beautiful woman appears between yawns from the prince. This woman is Cinderella. Cinderella is recognized immediately by the prince for her beauty. He then begins to dance and sing with her. The dancing and singing lead the king to believe that his son has found a bride. Coincidentally, he is correct. This all leads up to the fact that Prince Charming never really knew who Cinderella was. He didn't even know her name.

The perspective of the hero, projected through other characters, indicates that they want to marry a woman for her appearance and nurturing abilities. In Cinderella the prince has never learned Cinderella's name, let alone learned what her personality type was. This single male perspective in classic Disney films allows boys to associate marriage eligibility with beauty and exterior qualities. Even though these are detrimental undertones, they are still, in fact, male perspectives. In everyday life, boys pick up this ideal and use it as a quality they wish to obtain in a mate (Coward, 1992). This reflects poorly on both men and women. Men don't understand the idea of a woman as a person instead of an object, and women are subjected to being objects instead of people (Coward, 1992).

### **Effects of the Artifacts' Conception on Gender on the Audience**

Both the boys and girls of the audience are made to feel numerous things about classic Disney heroines. The boys in the audience are made to feel pity, adoration, and a longing to change our heroine's demise. It is important to look at each of these feelings in more detail. The girls of the audience feel the same effects, but they also associate with the heroines. It is for this reason that I will first discuss the boys of the audience followed by the girls.

First, the audience is made to feel pity for classic Disney heroines. For example, Cinderella is a beautiful, young, and sweet woman. She has not done anything bad to deserve the treatment she receives from her stepmother and stepsisters. Her beauty causes her stepmother and two stepsisters to despise her. In the story of Cinderella, beauty is rewarded with wealth and a better chance at class mobility (Bernikow, 1992).

Thus, Cinderella is punished and made to serve her stepmother and stepsisters, living in an unfit servant's room. Cinderella is made to wear only rags for clothes in an attempt to de-beautify her. The audience sees Cinderella as kind, pretty, and sweet. They watch how Cinderella is treated and immediately feel sorry for her. There is not necessarily a feeling of wrong doing, but merely pity.

Pity is also looked at in Sleeping Beauty. The character of Sleeping Beauty is pricked by a spindle and put into a deep sleep by a witch. Sleeping Beauty did nothing wrong to deserve this demise in the audience's eyes. The audience sees Sleeping Beauty as a beautiful innocent victim. They feel pity for her because a hideous witch has been cruel to her. She is forced to sleep until she is rescued.

Second, the audience feels adoration for classic Disney heroines. Once again, Cinderella's sweetness and beauty assist her in winning the audience over. She has a beauty that she treats with naiveté. Cinderella never shows any vain traits. It is for this reason that children love her. Here is a woman who is animatedly beautiful and does not know it. Snow White is another example of the adoration felt by the audience. She is beautiful and has lips the color of roses. She is kind to animals and dwarfs. Specifically, she is very kind to Grumpy, one of the seven dwarfs, who is mean and obnoxious towards her. The audience sees Snow White as adorable because she is sweet and beautiful to *everyone*.

Finally, the audience feels a longing to change our heroine's demise. For example, the audience feels that Snow White is in trouble and needs to be rescued when the witch, with the poison apple, approaches her. They feel a need for justice. This is keeping in mind that when children are watching Snow White they are in their

developmental stages. They realize that Snow White is suffering and wonder *who* will save her. Another example of this need for justice can be found in Cinderella. At the end of the film Cinderella is locked in her servants room in the attic by her stepmother. The king's assistant has come to their house to find out whom the lost glass slipper belongs to. It is Cinderella's child-like foot that fits into the slipper, but her stepmother would much rather one of her own daughters marry the prince. Thus, Cinderella is in a tough demise. In the end her animal friends unlock the attic door and she claims her shoe and prince. At this point of discussion the boys of the audience stop feeling for the heroines leaving the girls of the audience to continue.

The girls of the audience feel somewhat the same as the boys do, as stated previously, but there are some additional issues that need to be addressed. First, girls do feel pity, adoration, and a longing to change the heroine's demise, but they also associate with her. Girls have a yearning to be like Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty in all of their beauty and sweetness. For example, Snow White has hair the color of ebony and lips the color of roses. She is born beautiful and is adored by everyone. Her wicked stepmother sends someone to kill Snow White because she is more beautiful. The man, however, cannot kill Snow White because he adores her so much. This kind of beauty and sweetness is something that becomes desirable to little girls. There is also a great feeling that punishment and suffering leads to being rewarded in the end. For example, girls want to relate to Sleeping Beauty in that she is made to suffer before she can be rewarded. Little girls see that ultimate suffering will result in something good. Previously stated, there is a predominant female perspective throughout the movie. It is for this reason that girls may see life through Cinderella's eyes. Boys must adapt to the

perspective and only feel pity and adoration. They do not associate themselves with any of her situations. Boys can see what Cinderella's demise is, but do not internalize it as girls do.

### **The Artifact and How it Affects Women's Lives**

Classic Disney heroines affect women in their developmental stages of life. When little girls are developing their gender roles they are very vulnerable and susceptible to all influences. Most girls that watch classic Disney films do internalize the virtues and the values that are prevalent in the heroines present (Lieberman, 1986). One of the biggest issues that women have internalized is the idea of being beautiful in order to be rewarded. If pain and suffering are also involved than the reward will be greater.

Coincidentally, most girls only associate with the heroines and not any of the other female characters. The other female characters are interesting in that to most people they are only evil, but in reality they have many positive characteristics. The evil stepmother in Cinderella is animated to look ugly and dressed in dark clothing. Her face is made to look sharp and almost demon-like. There is a de-humanization of her character. The reason little girls don't associate with her is because they don't even see her as human. The same can be said about the witches in Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. For example, a woman later in life could possibly carry a poor opinion of stepmothers and mothers-in-law due to the view that they had of the evil female characters in classic Disney films.

A lot may be learned from the evil stepmother and witches. For example, the evil stepmother in Cinderella actually treats her own daughters quite nicely and totally

supports them in their endeavors. The evil characters in classic Disney films are actually powerful, ambitious, and cunning. These are qualities that the heroines lack. They are also qualities that women of the nineties strive to have. If girls were taught more about what good qualities the evil stepmother has they would begin to see that there is more to being successful than just beauty. Even in adulthood women still see Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White as good and the evil stepmother and witches as bad.

### **The Artifacts' Impact on Rhetorical Theory**

Classic Disney films go along with and follow traditional views of rhetoric. This viewpoint tends to be male-oriented. The films are projected in a manner that males expect and find norms throughout. Females, however, are not persuaded in the same manner. Females are made to accept male expectations and norms. The intended meaning and persuasion used in these films is projected as a man sees it. Another interesting fact is that the story of Cinderella was actually written by a man, thus making it difficult for Disney to make any improvements on how women are portrayed and how women are persuaded and get meaning out of the film (Bernikow, 1992).

These classic films also do not provide a new outlook on how women should behave or act. There is an intended meaning to be beautiful, docile, and stupid. Being submissive and suffering will ultimately end in reward. Also, the greater a woman suffers the greater the reward. It teaches women that one of the greatest rewards in life is being married to a man. This is a great virtue but it is not the only one. The artifact persuades girls to follow in our heroine's footsteps.



It is possible there could be some good meaning found in classic Disney films, but our society must first recognize what those meanings are. They are hidden ideas rather than intended meanings. For example, the evil stepmother could be looked at as a role model for an independent woman if Disney wouldn't make her appearance so dreary. Overall, the audience of this artifact sees the film through traditional male views and is persuaded accordingly.

Now in the nineties, Disney has attempted to create a film that portray women as powerful, cunning, and decisive. The film that I am referring to is *Mulan*. *Mulan* can be used as a point of comparison for classic animated Disney films. According to Wloszcyna (1998), *Mulan* breaks the mold of classic portrayals of women in Disney films. This is a story in which we may finally see a heroine who possesses many of the needed qualities that we should be projecting to our children. The story of *Mulan* takes place in China with a young seventeen-year-old girl who doesn't want to conform to her society's rules. She decides not to wed and, instead, dresses in drag and joins the military as a man. Wloszcyna (1998) claims, "After thirty-six animated features in more than sixty years, Disney's cartoon heroines are finally free of the bonds of their Barbie doll figures and saccharine-spiked romances" (p. 1D). In comparing this film with the classics, it can be seen that the girls of the audience are being persuaded in a different light. The idea that it is alright to break the rules of traditional society is conveyed. *Snow White* and *Cinderella* did not stand up to their stepmothers, and *Sleeping Beauty* was given a new identity to escape the witch. Also, the classic characters never felt that they could do anything by themselves, therefore always relying on help from others. *Mulan* is portrayed as an extraordinary woman who makes her own rules and decides what is best



for her. It is through this new Disney film that there may be hope for more contemporary views of rhetoric, as well as on women.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

Through a literature review and an analysis of efforts that have been made to investigate women portrayals in the mass media and in classic Disney films, it can be seen that there is a definite trend. Women as sexual objects, with perfect bodies, are still prevalent in today's media. It is not a problem from the past that need not be addressed. People are whom they are and who they strive to be is clearly defined by their family and friends, but is reinforced by the mass media. The mass media dictates gender roles in a manner that is detrimental to young women.

My specific analysis has allowed me to draw many conclusions. Overall, I have found that there are two different perspectives that are inherent throughout classic Disney films. Males and females can associate with the princes and heroines, respectively. There are also many negative aspects about these characters that both males and females internalize. These negative aspects move from being wealthy to being beautiful. They also put pressure on males and females to set unrealistic expectations for themselves. Males and females feel inadequate later in life because they may not achieve the high ideals they internalized as children. In looking at the future, it could be said that much more analysis is required to assist in finding out what can be done to prevent many of these stereotypes of women in mass media and films. If more research is conducted on these portrayals, we may have hopes of finding viable solutions to the problems in our society today.

More specifically, research also needs to be done in the area of fairy tales and any possible detrimental effects they have on children. In today's society, a realization of

what effects us when we are developing our gender roles is imperative. If more research is done on this topic, maybe Disney will continue on their current trend of the late nineties and produce more animated tales that teach children ideals other than those presented in their classics.

## References

- Allan, K. & Coltrane, S. (1996). Gender displaying television commercials: A comparative study of television commercials in the 1950s and 1980s. *Sex Roles*, 35, 185-203.
- Bernikow, L. (1992). Cinderella: Saturday afternoon at the movies. In M. Schaum, & C. Flanagan (Eds.), *Gender Images: Reading for composition* (pp. 264-278). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Brownmiller, S. (1992). Victims: The setting. In M. Schaum, & C. Flanagan (Eds.), *Gender Images: Reading for composition* (pp. 277-278). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Cash, T. F., Ancis, J. R., & Strachan, M. D. (1997). Gender attitudes, feminist identity, and body images among college women. *Sex Roles*, 36, 433-447.
- Coward, R. (1992). The body beautiful. In M. Schaum & C. Flanagan (Eds.), *Gender images* (pp. 412-418). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Fetterly, J. (1989). An American Dream: "Rip Van Winkle." In S. Foss (Ed.), *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Foss, S. (1989). *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.

Kilbourne, J. (1995). Beauty and the beast of advertising. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race, and class in media* (pp. 121-125). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.

Lafky, S., Duffy, M., Steinmaus, M., & Berkowitz, D. (1996). Looking through gendered lenses: Female stereotyping in advertisements and gender role expectations. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73, 379-388.

Lieberman, M. K. (1986). Some day my prince will come: Female acculturation through the fairy tale. In J. Zipes (Ed.), *Don't bet on the prince: Contemporary feminist fairy tales in North America and England* (pp. 185-200). New York: Methuen Inc.

MaCurdy, M. (1994). The four women of the apocalypse: Polarized feminine images in magazine advertisements. In L. Manca & A. Manca (Eds.), *Gender and utopia in advertising: A critical reader*. (pp. 31-48). Lisle, IL: Procopian Press.

Peirce, K. (1995). Socialization messages in *Seventeen* and *Teen* magazines. In C. M. Lout (Ed.), *Women and media: Content, careers, criticism*. (pp. 79-86). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Thievon, L. C. (1994). Content analysis of women's images in magazine advertisements: A follow up study (Master's Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1994).

Walsh-Childers, K. (1996). Women as sex partners. In P. M. Lester (Ed.), *Images that injure: Pictorial stereotypes in the media*. (pp. 81-85). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Weinbaum, B. (1998). A review of for-giving: A feminist criticism of exchange. *Off Our Backs*, 28, 20-21.

Wood, J. (1996). *Gendered relationships*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Wloszczyna, S. (1998, June 18). Mulan breaks the mold. *USA Today*, pp. D1, D2.

Zoonen, L. (1994). *Feminist media studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

<sup>2</sup>  
VITA

Melissa Ellen Seyler

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: Female Portrayals in Mass Media: An analysis of women in animated Disney films

Major Field: Speech Communication

Biographical.

Personal Data: Born in Reading, Pennsylvania on December 31, 1974, the daughter of Marlin Seyler and Margaret Keller.

Education: Attended Shippensburg University from August 1992 to May 1996 and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Speech Communication. Attended Oklahoma State University from August 1997 to May 1999. Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Speech Communication.

Experience: Speech instructor at Oklahoma State University from August 1997 to present; safety director at The Beistle Company from January 1997 to August 1998.

Professional Memberships: Lambda Pi Eta, National Communication Association